4. Counts Based on Use of Non-Shelter Services

This chapter describes a strategy for collecting data on unsheltered homeless people based on their use of non-shelter services such as soup kitchens, food pantries, Health Care for the Homeless facilities, outreach programs, and mainstream social service agencies. This approach is based on the notion that many homeless people who do not use shelters will nevertheless use other services occasionally, particularly food programs, in order to survive. This group of homeless people includes those living in "hidden" places such as cars, abandoned buildings, and subway tunnels, i.e., those who may not be easily found during a traditional public places count.

This chapter provides information about:

- Who should use the service-based method;
- Targeting service providers and sites for the survey;
- Selecting a time period for data collection;
- Gaining the cooperation of participating agencies;
- Using screeners and interviewing for essential and supplemental information;
- Dealing with duplication; and
- Biases, feasibility, and cost issues.

One of the key differences between this "service-based" approach and the one-night public places counts described in Chapter 3 is that you cannot rely on simple observation or enumerator judgment to determine whether the people you are counting are homeless. Many people who use services targeted for homeless people, such as soup kitchens, and most people who use mainstream social services will not be homeless according to HUD's definition. As a result, it is essential to ask screener questions of everyone encountered through this method. This chapter includes a section on using screener questions to determine who meets the federal definition of homelessness.

A second key difference between the service-based approach and the one-night counts is that you cannot rely on enumerator observation or judgment to determine whether the person has already been counted by another organization, or at an earlier date by the same agency. To unduplicate you need interview information. If you are trying to achieve a complete census and interview everyone you determine to be homeless, you need to collect personal identifying information that allows you to check for, and eliminate, duplication. The use of client information to unduplicate also applies to counts that include an interviewing component for a sample of persons. You may also want to collect information on service use during the study period to help eliminate duplication.

The service-based approach generally works as follows:

- First, the CoC agrees upon a list of providers and service delivery sites that unsheltered homeless people are likely to use. It is usually most efficient to focus on non-shelter service locations that serve and target homeless people, such as soup kitchens, food programs, and specialized health care services. However, many suburban and rural communities do not have extensive homeless services. In such places, the count is usually focused on mainstream social service agencies that are used by homeless and non-homeless people. These agencies may include TANF, community action, health, and public housing agencies, to name a few.

- Second, once the service locations have been identified, service providers (often with the assistance of volunteers) are asked to conduct interviews of people using the service over a given period of time. Every person requesting services during the established period is screened for homelessness. The initial interview consists of screener questions to determine the person's homeless status.

- Finally, additional questions inquiring about the person's household composition, history of homelessness, and use of services are administered to persons identified as being homeless.

The box on the following page describes the service-based approach taken by the Kentucky Balance of State CoC in its 2001 count and survey of unsheltered homeless people.

Much of the information covered in the previous chapter on preparing to conduct a count, advertising the count, developing survey instruments, and training, is also applicable for the service-based approach. This chapter focuses on differences between counts based on use of services and counts of people in public places.

Kentucky's Use of the Service-Based Approach to Collect Data on Unsheltered Homeless People Across the State

Beginning in February 2001, the Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC) undertook a 10-week survey of 118 of Kentucky's 120 counties (excluding Jefferson and Fayette Counties, which are separate CoCs). Because the state is largely rural and does not have homeless-specific providers in most areas, the primary strategy was to conduct a survey of homeless people accessing a range of social services.

KHC worked through 15 local CoC planning boards to recruit service providers and mainstream agencies to participate in the survey. Service provider and agency staff were instructed to administer the survey to everyone who accessed their service over the 10-week study period. The survey was designed to determine whether the respondent was homeless and took about 10 minutes to complete. Agencies and service providers mailed their completed surveys to a central location for coding and data entry.

The survey was conducted over an extended period because KHC knew that unsheltered homeless people, particularly in rural areas, access services infrequently. The study was originally planned for eight weeks. In some localities, however, data collection got off to a slow start, so KHC extended the survey period by two weeks to be sure to capture as many homeless people as possible. KHC ultimately received 1,703 completed surveys (including non-homeless people and homeless people living in shelters) from 71 counties.

Researchers used information from the survey to unduplicate or eliminate surveys completed by the same person at different times. They were able to construct a point-in-time count from data collected over the 10-weeks period by asking each person interviewed whether they had been homeless on the survey's first day. Everyone who was homeless on that day was included in the point-in-time statistic, whether the interview took place on that day or not. Thus Kentucky obtained both a point-in-time number and an estimate of how many people became homeless during the 10-week period.

4.1 Who Should Use the Service-Based Method?

As with the public places count, the service-based approach can work in a number of local circumstances. This method can also be combined with a block-by-block count or a count of known locations. In particular, the service-based approach may be a good option for:

- CoCs interested in learning about unsheltered homeless people who may not be found in a simple "street" count, such as people living in cars, abandoned buildings, and other hidden locations often not covered in such counts; and/or

- CoCs for which a block-by-block count or count based on known locations may not be feasible due to the size or topography of the jurisdiction.

The service-based approach has been used successfully in cities, suburban areas, rural areas, and across entire states. As described below, the types of services targeted for survey – either non-shelter homeless services such as soup kitchens or mainstream social service agencies such as Food Stamp Program offices – will depend on two factors. First, the prevalence of these types of services within the CoC. Second, in the case of mainstream social services, the extent to which homeless people are likely to access these services on a regular or semi-regular basis.

4.2   Targeting Service Providers and Sites for the Survey

One of the first steps in applying this method is identifying the service providers and agencies to target for your data collection effort. To the extent that they exist in your community, providers that focus on the needs of homeless people, such as soup kitchens and emergency food programs, may be the most efficient way to gain access to homeless people that do not use shelters. Soup kitchens and other programs that serve prepared meals to be eaten on the premises are primarily an urban phenomenon. By contrast, food pantries or food shelves, which distribute bags or boxes of uncooked food or vouchers to be traded for food, are found in both urban and rural settings. Many of these emergency food programs are on local or statewide lists that receive surplus commodities through the U.S. Department of Agriculture or support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Your state may already do some type of hunger survey of these programs, and you could piggyback on that effort to learn more about the homeless people who use these services.

Several CoCs interviewed for this study, including those that cover large geographic, urban, suburban, or rural areas, have tried to include a broader range of service providers in their data collection efforts. For example, the metropolitan Denver CoC, which covers a seven-county area, encourages each county to include any organization or agency that interacts with homeless people in the point-in-time survey of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people. In 2003, unsheltered homeless people were interviewed at food programs, day shelters, homeless treatment facilities, hospital emergency rooms, County Department of Human Services offices, and work programs.

CoCs have conducted counts and surveys of unsheltered homeless people at the following service locations:

- Outreach programs (Remember that outreach **is a service program** and can be handled as a "service site." Even though outreach workers are mobile they can be included in a service-based approach.)
- Soup kitchens, food pantries, and clothing programs
- Day shelters, and drop-in and warming centers

- Community Action Agencies and Community Action Partnership (CAP) agencies
- Health Care for the Homeless sites, public health departments, community health centers, and hospital emergency rooms
- Social service agencies (e.g., Food Stamp and TANF offices)
- Housing offices
- Day labor sites
- Employment centers and libraries
- Churches and other religious institutions that provide homeless services
- Schools
- Detoxification and psychiatric or addiction treatment facilities*
- Jails* and police stations

> * Caution: In surveying people in institutional settings, it is important to remember that HUD's definition of homelessness does not include people "living" in health care facilities, foster care or other youth facilities, and corrections programs and institutions. CoCs surveying homeless people in such locations generally include questions to determine how long the person expects to stay at the facility and whether they will have housing upon discharge.

With such a broad list of service providers and agencies that could potentially be included in a data collection effort, narrowing down the list of entities for participation in the service-based count can be challenging. The first step is to assemble a data collection planning committee that includes representatives from homeless service providers, the local hunger coalition, and mainstream social service agencies. If police stations and emergency rooms are possible survey locations, law enforcement agencies and hospital administrators should be included as well. It is not necessary to include agencies that may serve only a few homeless people each year.

CoCs that cover several counties have found it helpful to designate local coordinators in each county to identify the service locations at which to conduct the survey and, ultimately, to manage the data collection effort. In Denver, for example, the CoC assigned a lead person in each of seven counties to coordinate data collection efforts in that area. These leaders were instructed to contact every provider of homeless services in the county, as well as every agency that works with homeless people, to encourage their participation in the survey.

For Kentucky's 2001 count, the Kentucky Housing Corporation worked through 15 local CoC planning boards to survey homeless people accessing services in 118 counties. The planning boards were responsible for identifying survey locations, recruiting agencies to participate, and coordinating the completion of the surveys.

Combining Service-Based Enumeration with Counts in Public Places

As mentioned above, CoCs frequently use the service-based approach in combination with a block-by-block "street" count or a count based on known locations. In such cases, interviews occur at service agencies, while at the same time outreach workers or volunteer enumerators conduct the survey outdoors. It is important to remember when combining methods that you must conduct a basic interview with *everyone* counted in both outdoor and service locations to avoid double counting people who may sleep on the street but receive meals from one or more food programs during the day.

4.3   Selecting a Time Period for Data Collection

The CoCs interviewed for this guide conduct their service-based data collection at different times of the year, depending in part on the local climate. As discussed in Chapter 3, CoCs generally conduct the counts when they believe shelter usage to be at its peak. In most parts of the country, counts occur during the winter months (December through March), but some CoCs operate on a different schedule. For example, the Broward County, FL, CoC conducts its sheltered and unsheltered counts in August because that is when its shelters are at peak capacity due to the extreme heat.

Beginning in 2005, however, HUD will request that point-in-time sheltered and unsheltered counts take place every other year, during the last week in January. However, for CoCs with a good rationale for conducting the point-in-time count at another time, HUD will allow for variation in the timing of counts. For CoCs using a service-based approach that lasts more than one day, the single date chosen for the point-in-time tally should fall within the last week in January. Service-based interviewing can extend beyond that particular week as long as individuals and families are asked about their homeless status on the selected day for the point-in-time count.

> CoCs should ensure that service-based counts take place during a time when key service providers in the community are seeing clients (i.e., try not to pick a day when a major soup kitchen is closed or a health care center is not seeing patients).

The key difference in terms of timing between the "street" or public places count described in Chapter 3 and the service-based approach described here is that service-based counts occur during the day rather than at night and will most likely take place over more than a single day. The period of time over which the count is conducted depends on:

- The size of the CoC's jurisdiction relative to the number of staff and volunteer resources that can be deployed;

- The types of service locations being targeted; and

- The frequency with which homeless people access services at the survey locations.

Large CoCs such as the Pasadena, CA and Broward County, FL conduct their surveys over several days because it is not feasible to cover the entire jurisdiction in a 24-hour period. However, other CoCs using a service-based approach, such as the City of Tallahassee, the Denver metropolitan area, and the Washington Balance of State have been able to complete their counts within a single night and day.

The type of service provider participating in the service-based count also affects how long it will take to complete data collection. If the CoC is able to conduct interviews at service sites that homeless people access, such as soup kitchens and food pantries, the timeframe may be short since a substantial proportion of the unsheltered homeless population will access these services in the course of a day. Homeless people do not access mainstream social service agencies – such as TANF, Food Stamps, and Medicaid offices – as often, and a longer data collection period may be necessary.

> Whether the count takes place in a single day or over multiple days, you will need to have a strategy for eliminating double counting. Interviews are *always* required for the service-based method because people may use multiple services in a given day and may be counted both in the shelter count and in the service-based counts. (See Section 4.7, Dealing with Duplication.)

An extended data collection period is often necessary in rural areas or areas with few homeless-specific services. In such communities, homeless persons may access services infrequently, especially service-resistant persons. To address this problem, the Kentucky Balance of State CoC, which relied heavily on mainstream service providers for its service-based count, conducted interviews over two and a half months (see description above). The long data collection period gave Kentucky the opportunity to capture information on many homeless people who do not access homeless-specific or mainstream service programs regularly.

Obtaining a Point-in-Time Estimate from Data Collected Over Several Days or Weeks

To derive the point-in-time estimate required by HUD, you need to include a question that asks people where they were staying on the night designated for your point-in-time count. This date is typically the night before the first day of your data collection effort. For example, if you began surveying people on January 23rd, everyone interviewed on the 23rd would be asked where they spent the previous night in order to determine whether they meet HUD's definition of homelessness. People interviewed after the 23rd would be asked where they spent the night of the 22nd in order to collect comparable data. Only people determined to be homeless on the night of the 22nd would be included in your point-in-time count, although the interviews with people who became homeless after that date would undoubtedly provide useful information on patterns of homelessness and service needs. See Chapter 5 for examples of these kinds of questions used in Kentucky and Denver.

> **HUD STANDARD**
>
> **Deriving a Point-in-Time Estimate from Service-Based Data**
>
> To fulfill the requirements of the CoC application, communities that use the service-based method to enumerate unsheltered homeless people must have a way to calculate a point-in-time total. CoCs should designate one night to gather information for the point-in-time count. Usually the night before the first day of data collection and the same night as the sheltered count works best. A survey question should ask about the individual's or family's housing situation on the night selected for the point-in-time count regardless of when the interview takes place.

4.4   Training

Chapter 3 discussed who should conduct the count and the level of training required to conduct the count. This information applies to service-based counts as well. However, the level of training needed will typically be higher than that required for a simple count, since service-based enumerations require interviews and typically rely on a combination of service provider staff, outreach workers, and volunteers. Service providers, especially mainstream service providers such as TANF agencies, do not normally ask their clients about homelessness and housing needs. As a result, mainstream providers will need instructions on conducting the interviews and a clear and simple survey form. Volunteers will similarly require considerable training. You will also have to develop procedures for the providers and volunteers to report the results. For CoCs covering a large geographic area, local coordinators can play a critical role in assembling completed survey forms and making sure that the forms are being completed correctly.

Several CoCs that conduct service-based counts across a large geographic area have invested considerable resources in making the training accessible to all of the individuals and organizations participating in the data collection effort. For example, the metropolitan Denver CoC conducts a training session of approximately two hours in each of the seven counties and an additional session for anyone who was not able to attend the session in their county. The training is generally attended by the Executive Director of each participating organization, as well as several caseworkers if the organization is large.

The Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC) provided three training sessions in different parts of the state for the 15 local CoC planning boards that coordinated the survey effort. The sessions were used to review the survey instrument and research methodology, discuss the importance of accurate and reliable data collection, and provide an opportunity for "interview practice sessions." After completing the training, local coordinators explained the survey procedures to the participating service agencies in their communities. KHC, through its subcontractor, Morehead State University, also provided a toll-free number that service agencies could call during the 10-week study period with questions about the survey instrument and procedures.

4.5 Gaining the Cooperation of Participating Agencies

Encouraging participation from service agencies and ensuring that the survey is administered correctly and consistently can be a major challenge. This is particularly true if the data collection is happening over a large area with multiple jurisdictions. In Kentucky, the local CoC planning boards were offered a "research assistance award" of up to $1,000 based on the level of participation they elicited from local service agencies in the 2001 statewide survey. Nonetheless, it was difficult to convince some agencies to conduct the survey over the full two-month study period. Some agencies waited until the end of the study period to begin conducting surveys, which resulted in an incomplete picture of their service population. The delays prompted KHC to extend the study period by two weeks. Ultimately, KHC determined that the strategy of providing an incentive payment to local CoC planning boards was only partly successful. KHC concluded that a better approach might have been to pay service agencies a small incentive payment ($5 to $10) for each survey completed. One of the lead KHC staff people who worked on the project also suggested that the person who is managing the data collection should contact local coordinators and individual agencies regularly to make sure that they are implementing the survey correctly.

The Florida Coalition for the Homeless has encouraged the 28 CoCs in the state to use a standard methodology for conducting local counts. The methodology involves a survey conducted over a 24-hour period in all places where homeless people may be found, including shelters and transitional housing facilities, soup kitchens and other non-shelter homeless providers, mainstream service agencies, and outdoor locations. The survey is administered by trained volunteers and provider agencies, and self-administered by homeless people. The Florida Coalition has encouraged local CoCs to use this methodology by publishing a survey instrument and a detailed training guide on how to use the instrument and how to organize the count. The survey and the training guide are available on the web at http://www.flacoalitionhomeless.com/serviceproviders.htm. The Coalition has also tried to be responsive to local needs. Although local CoCs are strongly discouraged from eliminating any questions from the survey instrument, they are free to add questions to better understand the nature of homelessness in their communities. The Coalition has also created a series of optional modules to the survey for in-depth data collection on mental health, substance abuse, and disability issues.

The Denver metropolitan CoC also struggled to garner the full participation of local service agencies in its count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people across seven counties. Provider participation was particularly challenging the first year the CoC conducted the count (1998), because service agencies did not have a sense of what kind of information the effort would produce and how it would benefit them. The CoC found that producing a detailed report on the survey findings and distributing that report to every

> The Denver CoC makes the de-identified, raw data collected through its survey available to anyone who wants to use it and will run special cross-tabulations upon request, including the survey findings at a particular service location.

participating agency was helpful in ensuring cooperation with the count in subsequent years. According to the CoC representative who led the survey effort, local agencies were able use the report in a variety of ways: to answer questions from the media, to prepare internal and Board reports, and to prepare grant applications.

The Denver CoC also makes the de-identified, raw data collected through the survey available to anyone who wants to use it and will run specialized cross-tabulations of the data upon request. The Denver CoC can also produce reports of the survey findings at a particular service location. The CoC representative said that making the survey results widely accessible has been a key factor in gaining the active participation of a wide range of local agencies and service providers.

4.6   Using Screeners and Interviewing for Essential and Supplemental Information

As described in Chapter 3, screeners are a series of questions designed to determine if someone is homeless. The service-based method requires that *every person counted* be screened to establish if they meet HUD's definition of homelessness, as well as any local variations on that definition. Screening is necessary since many people who use non-shelter homeless services and most people who use mainstream social services are not homeless.

Screener questions can be used to exclude people you do not want to interview (the interviewer can be instructed to stop the interview if the screener criteria are not fulfilled) and to sort the interviews once they are completed. Screeners typically include several questions that identify where a person is currently living (including different types of housing, institutional settings, and places not meant for human habitation) and how long they intend to stay there. Some interviews also ask people directly whether they are homeless or whether they have a permanent place to stay. Other examples of screener questions can be found in the interview guides reproduced in Chapter 5.

> **Sample Screener Questions**
>
> - As of today, do you have some place that you consider to be your home or the place where you live?
> - Is that a room, an apartment, a house, a shelter, or a spot in some public place, such as a park bench or bench in a bus station?
> - Where do you usually sleep?
>
> (From New York's 2003 public places count in Manhattan)

Most CoCs that use the service-based approach supplement the screener with a full interview. Indeed, this is one of the main benefits of the service-based approach. Interviews present an opportunity to learn about the person's recent shelter and service use patterns, his/her history of homelessness, and subpopulation characteristics   CoCs can include interview questions that inquire about disabilities, domestic violence, substance abuse, or health-related issues to gather the information required for the Continuum of Care Population and Subpopulation Chart. While the CoC application requires subpopulation information for sheltered homeless

individuals and families, such information is optional for unsheltered homeless people, except for chronically homelessly persons.

Sample Additional Interview Questions

To understand service patterns:
- What was the last county and city you lived in before you became homeless?
- In what type of place did you spend the night of _____ (the first day of the count)?
- In which county and city did you spend the night of _____ (the first day of the count)?
- How long have you been homeless this time?
- How many times have you been homeless before this time?

(From Denver's 2003 count)

Interviews also offer an opportunity to estimate the number of unsheltered homeless people who meet HUD's definition of chronic homelessness, which is a required element of the CoC application. In order to determine whether a person is chronically homeless, the interview must ask about the length of time the person has been continuously homeless, how many times the person has been homeless in the past three years, and whether the person has a disabling condition (see the definition of chronic homelessness in Chapter 2, Section 2.2). There is some debate among homeless service providers about how to determine accurately whether someone has a disabling condition. The survey forms reproduced in Chapter 5 provide examples of how three CoCs have collected this information. In brief:

- The metropolitan Denver CoC asks:
  Have you ever received, or are you currently receiving treatment or services for any of the conditions below:
  - Severe mental illness
  - Chronic drug abuse
  - HIV/AIDS related illnesses
  - Chronic alcohol abuse
  - Tuberculosis
  - Other physical condition
  - Not applicable, haven't received any services

- The Kentucky statewide survey asks:
  Are you aware of any physical illness/disabilities that you have?
  Are you aware of any mental illness that you have?

- The Florida Coalition for the Homeless' 2003 Core Survey Instrument asks:
  Do you have a disabling condition?
  What type of disabling condition do you have?
    - Physical/medical problems – besides HIV/AIDS
    - HIV/AIDS
    - Mental health or emotional problems
    - Drug or alcohol problems
    - Other

Ideally, the interviews should be brief – no longer than 15 to 20 minutes. If you need more information to eliminate duplication you can interview a sample of people in depth to learn more about service needs and other issues (see discussion of sampling in Chapter 3, Section 3.8). When developing the interview questions, it is helpful to enlist advice from currently or formerly homeless people. The Greater Grand Traverse Area CoC found the input of homeless individuals very helpful in designing its survey of unsheltered homeless people in public places and service locations.

> CoCs generally use the same set of interview questions to collect information about sheltered and unsheltered homeless populations.

After designing the survey instrument, you will need to develop a detailed set of procedures to guide the interview process. Two issues to consider are: who will administer the survey and how will you encourage unsheltered homeless people to participate.

Information Collected Through Interviews

Most interview forms collect some or all of the following information:

- Name
- Date of birth
- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Age
- Household composition (how many adults, children)
- The last city the person lived in before the current location
- Length of time the person has been homelessness

- How many times the person has been homeless
- Reasons the individual became homeless
- Disability status
- Veteran status
- Employment status
- Income level and source of income
- Housing needs
- Supportive services needs

Who will administer the survey?

Generally, CoCs rely on some combination of service provider staff, outreach workers, and volunteers to conduct the interviews. It is usually recommended that the people conducting the interviews have some experience either with homelessness issues or with data collection. Regardless of who administers the survey, the CoC should provide thorough training so that

the interviewers understand what the questions mean, how to ask them, how to record the responses, and how to deal with refusals, incoherent answers, and other potential areas of confusion. Some CoCs have found it effective to use currently or formerly homeless people to conduct the interviews because it increases the comfort level of the person being interviewed and leads to more authentic responses. If you have access to a group of homeless individuals who are willing to help with the interviews, either on a volunteer or paid basis, for example through the VA's Compensated Work Therapy Program, this may be a great approach. However, training will be important for anyone not accustomed to doing this kind of data collection.

In some cases, CoCs allow homeless people to complete the surveys themselves, with assistance from volunteers as needed. Other CoCs allow service providers to answer questions on behalf of a client if they have information about that person. These methods are likely to result in less accurate information and lower participation rates in the survey, but give some CoCs a greater degree of flexibility on how the information is obtained. Flexibility in data collection methods is particularly important if the CoC is trying to collect information over a large geographic area and through a wide range of service providers.

How will you encourage unsheltered homeless people to participate?

Your CoC will need to consider how you are going to encourage people to participate in the interview process. Although every survey must deal with refusals to particular questions, the goal is to maximize participation in the full survey and, at the very least, collect enough information from each person determine an individual's homeless status and unduplicate.

A number of communities offer an incentive to encourage participation in the survey. For example, the Tallahassee CoC provides gift bags with toiletries and other essentials to encourage participation. The interview takes 15 to 20 minutes and multiple gift bags are given to anyone who requests more than one in order to reduce the likelihood that people will deliberately try to be interviewed more than once. McHenry County, IL asks three or four questions in a one- to five-minute interview process and offers food coupons as an incentive.

4.7   Dealing with Duplication

Duplication is a major challenge with all homeless counts. Duplicate counting is especially likely to occur if people may have been counted at different locations on different days. If you conduct interviews at service agencies such as soup kitchens, Health Care for the Homeless sites, or TANF offices, you are virtually certain to count some people more than once because many homeless people use these services each day. On the other hand, in restricting the timeframe for data collection, you may miss significant numbers of people, especially in areas with relatively few or no homeless assistance providers.

In order to ensure an unduplicated count you must review personal identifying information collected through interviews. An individual's set of unique identifiers, such as date of birth,

gender, portions of the first and last names, and social security number are used to check completed questionnaires to identify any duplicate records. This can be done by looking at the actual questionnaires, but it is usually easier to first enter interview information into a database. After entering interview information, check for and eliminate duplicate records with the same set of names, birth dates, social security numbers, and other identifying information. Although achieving a perfect unduplicated count is nearly impossible, you should eliminate, to the best of your ability, any unsheltered people counted or interviewed twice.

In the absence of personal identifying information, it is possible to use other information collected through the interviews to estimate how many people are likely to have been counted twice. This method is more complicated and less concrete than the unique identifiers approach because you cannot determine precisely who has been counted twice. The method involves asking all the homeless people you interview at all locations (including *both* sheltered and unsheltered homeless people) about their use of shelters and other services during the past 7 days. ("In the past 7 days, on how many days did you sleep in shelters?" "In the past 7 days, on how many days did you eat in soup kitchens?" and so on.) Once you have this information there are several ways to use it. The simplest is the following:

For everyone you found at shelters, make a column in which you display the proportion who had a chance to be found in each of the other locations, either because they used the services or because they had slept on the street within the past week. For instance, for all people found in shelters, if 100 percent used shelters, 70 percent used soup kitchens, 10 percent used health care facilities, and 50 percent spent at least one night on the streets out of the past seven days, your array would look like the first column below. Make a column for each type of location where you looked for homeless people.

What They Used in Last 7 Days	Where You Found Them			
	Shelters (N=100)	Soup Kitchens (N=100)	Health Care (N=100)	Streets (N=100)
Shelters	100	50	40	30
Soup Kitchens	70	100	70	80
Health Care	10	5	100	5
Streets	50	75	65	100
Numbers Interviewed at Location (N=400)	100	100	100	100
Unduplicated Numbers (N=190)	100	50	25	15

Suppose you do a week-long study. On the first night, you conduct your shelter count and get a comprehensive count of all people using shelters, and find 100 people. Throughout the rest of the week you visit other service and street locations, and find 100 people in each type of location. For a crude way to eliminate duplication, begin with shelters. Count everyone

you found at shelters (100 people). Next look at the people you found at soup kitchens, and count *only* those who did *not* use shelters during the past week (50 people). (If they did use shelters, you would have counted them as part of the shelter users, and you do not want to double count them.) Do the same thing for each additional location type. In the example above, only 25 of the people found at health care sites had not used shelters or soup kitchens during the past week, and only 15 of the people found on the streets had not used any of the three services in the past week. Your total unduplicated count of homeless people for this week is thus 190, not 400.

If you do collect this type of data to help in estimating an unduplicated count, you need to be careful about its reliability. You may need to specify all of the types of programs you mean when you ask the question, so people have a chance to answer you truthfully in relation to the way you will interpret the answer. For example, you <u>do not</u> want to do any of the following:

- Ask people whether they use food programs and have them say "no" because they are thinking only of soup kitchens that serve hot meals, when in fact they pick up a brown bag lunch every day from a church food program and they eat a hot meal once or twice a week at a drop-in center;

- Ask people whether they sleep in shelters, and have them say "no" when they are supported by a voucher program to live in a hotel;

- Ask people whether they have a home of their own, and have them say "yes," when their home is a shelter or a cardboard box in a back alley.

The approach described above probably overcorrects for duplication because it does not take into consideration the fact that over the course of seven days many more people might be found at each location than happened to be there when your survey team arrived. If you wanted to add complexity to the task of determining an unduplicated count, you could use statistical methods to account for the frequency with which each person could be found in each location during the week. You have this information from the answers to your interview questions if you asked *on how many occasions* the person used a given service location over the past seven days. However, many CoCs will likely need statistical assistance from a researcher or local university to conduct this more sophisticated analysis.

4.8   Biases, Feasibility, and Cost

Biases

The main bias with the service-based approach is that, unless it is coupled with a count of public places, it is likely to miss unsheltered homeless people who do not use any services. The approach will also overestimate the number of people meeting HUD's definition of homelessness without a series of good screener questions.

The potential advantage of the service-based approach is that it allows the CoC to collect more information on the characteristics, service uses, and needs of unsheltered service-using

homeless people than a basic public places count without interviews. It is also likely to provide a better estimate (though still an undercount) of the number of unsheltered homeless people in a community, since many people try to hide at night for their own safety and may deliberately avoid the count.

Feasibility

The service-based approach can be conducted using volunteers with relative ease. Using volunteers in fact may be the best approach since some homeless service providers may not be accustomed to, or comfortable with, collecting information from their clients. As discussed in the previous section, the most important statistical issue that you will face with this method is that you must include strategies to unduplicate within and across services. Key procedural issues to solve are: gaining the cooperation of service agencies; establishing a schedule for interviewing and screening procedures; determining the incentive, if any, for completing interviews (payment, gift, voucher); and finding private space for conducting the interview (if needed).

Cost

The more comprehensive your survey, the more expensive data collection becomes. The service-based approach tends to be more expensive than a simple public places count because you need to invest in gaining the participation of numerous service agencies, training staff and volunteers, and administering screener questions and interviews.

Service-based approaches also increase the level of data analysis. Given all the information collected on each person counted, it may not be possible to use a simple spreadsheet program like Excel or Access to analyze the data. Instead, you may need to use specialized statistical software such as SPSS, SAS, or STATA. If your CoC does not have someone with expertise in one of these programs, you may want to partner with a local university that may be able to provide technical assistance at low cost. Alternatively, several CoCs have contracted with private vendors for data entry and analysis.

The Denver metropolitan CoC hired a data entry contractor to enter and unduplicate the more than 10,000 surveys collected through its point-in-time count of shelters, non-shelter service locations, and public places. The cost was approximately $15,000 and was paid for through Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds from several of the participating counties. Kentucky hired Morehead State University to coordinate the data collection and analysis for its 2001 statewide survey of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people. The cost of Morehead's services was approximately $75,000.